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A Work in Progress

At Ellison Center, 'the Vision Is Becoming Reality'

By June LaBonte

The smell of sawdust from freshly cut beams greeted members of the public who turned out Saturday morning to get a peek at the new home of the Ellison Center for the Arts.

Picking their way around extension wires, cement blocks and steel pipes, the 100 or so visitors looked beyond the rough walls of the classrooms, performing stage, galleries and studios of the former Holy Family Church at the corner of St. George and Cedar streets.

"It's exciting," said Frank

Wisneski, a member of the board of trustees for the South Shore Conservatory. "It's one thing to see the vision on paper, but today the vision is becoming reality."

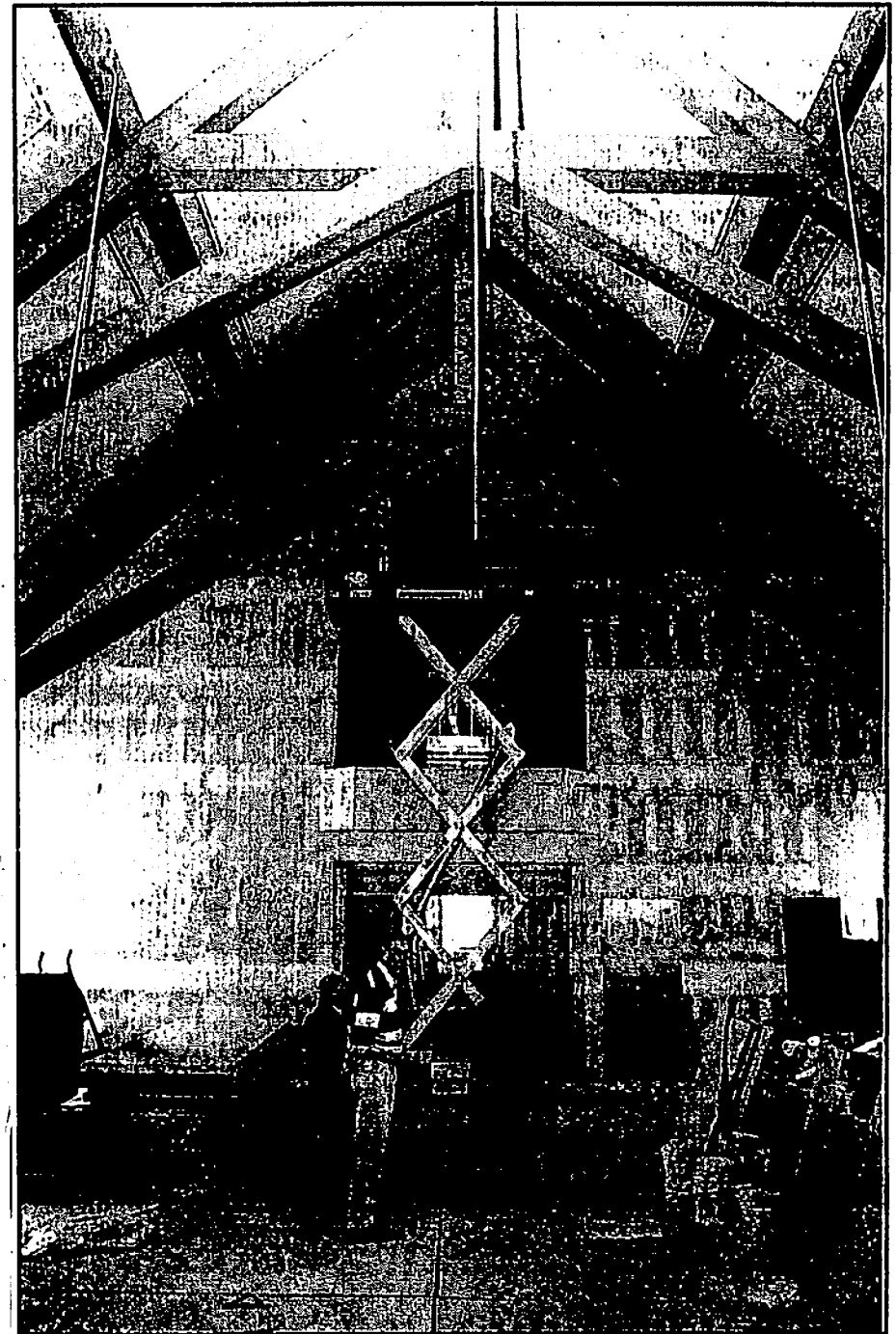
The vision has met with a few bumpy patches along the way. Organizers for the \$2.5 million project conceived the idea in 1987, eight years after the conservatory's Duxbury branch opened in the basement of the First Parish Church. Swelling classes led it to relocate to the Lower Alden Elementary School, but space continued to be an issue.

A feasibility study undertaken

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Volunteer Colin Clark, 7-1/2, came to the site tour prepared with a utility belt full of tools.



Clara Clapp and Patricia Fawcett get a tour of the Ellison Center's theater area from South Shore Conservatory Director Jim Simpson.

Staff Photos by Chris Bernstein

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later indicated that the conservatory wasn't "visible enough" in the community to embark on a fund-raising campaign. The study's findings ultimately led the conservatory to join forces with the well-established Duxbury Art Association.

The vision was deferred for seven years while the conservatory looked for a suitable site before purchasing the property. It bought the building, which Holy Family had called home until moving to Tremont Street in 1988, from the Archdiocese of Boston for \$375,000.

"The idea was to build a center that would house both the visual and performing arts," Linda Glynn of the South Shore Conservatory said Saturday, adding that the conservatory would be offering programs in singing, music and dance, while the DAA would offer classes in

painting, pottery and sculpture.

The location is ideal, Glynn said, because it lies within the town's "campus-like setting," among the schools, the library, the pool and the art complex. When parking demands exceed the 52-car limit on site, as might be expected during recitals or performances, the lot at the high school can handle the overflow, she said.

Since construction began on the 9,500-square-foot structure in March, a crew of roughly 40 to 50 workers, employed by Martins Construction of Danvers, has been laboring in the former church, painstakingly removing and preserving much of the original paneling, the doors and the woodwork.

In the former congregation room, where parishioners once bowed their heads in prayer, a workman carried a bucket of plaster, one of many materials the crew is using to transform the room into a multi-purpose performance hall.

"We didn't want to hold up work," Bob McCluskey, a member of the building committee,

told visitors. He added that, while construction is roughly on track for the Sept. 1 deadline, "it's going to be a push for fall completion."

A stage sits at the far end of the hall where the church's main entrance had been located. Once opened, the hall, which will have a seating capacity of 150, will serve as a studio for ballet programs and an arts-based preschool program to start in September 1997.

"As you can see, we've retained the original ceiling," McCluskey said. The painting, which includes stenciling, will be cleaned and restored, as will the windows.

"Basically, we have the rough work done," he said. "The framing, rough plumbing, rough electricity; the rough walls."

That leaves about six weeks for the finishing touches to be done on the interior of the building: wood-finishing, painting, flooring and carpeting.

The main entrance, on Cedar Street, leads to an entry hall and a "hallway" gallery. "Local artists will exhibit their work here," said

Christine Swem, president of the Duxbury Art Association, pointing to an unfinished hallway that branches in two directions: right to the performance hall and left to the new wing. The administrative offices, which are to the left of the entry hall, are also in the "rough" stage of construction, as is a music classroom facing the entry hall.

Neighbors Martha and George Palfrey had

eyes only for possibilities. "We couldn't be more excited. We're hoping for more of the same, a better concentration of what we all love," Martha said, referring to musical performances and art exhibits. "I inherited an organ. Maybe now I can come here so I can learn how to play it."

The senior couple, who live on St. George Street, said they've been supporters of the project from the start.

"Maybe this will inspire us to get off our duffs and do more," said George, a painter whose works have been auctioned on

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Channel 2.

In walking through the main floor of the new wing, Barbara Clifford, chairwoman of the capital campaign, also had little trouble envisioning the future. "Now we have a real sense of what it will look like," she said. "It was slow going at first, but now that the foundation is in, the walls are up, the firebrick is in place, it's terribly exciting."

The upper level of the new wing will feature two studios, one for painting, the other for ceramics. The main level has two large classrooms, one at either end, and three smaller practice rooms where teachers can give one-on-one instruction or work with smaller groups. A percussion studio, donated by the Zildjian Company of Norwell — manufacturer of cymbals and drumsticks — is planned for the lower level, Glynn said. The studio will be named for Avedis Zildjian, the company's founder.

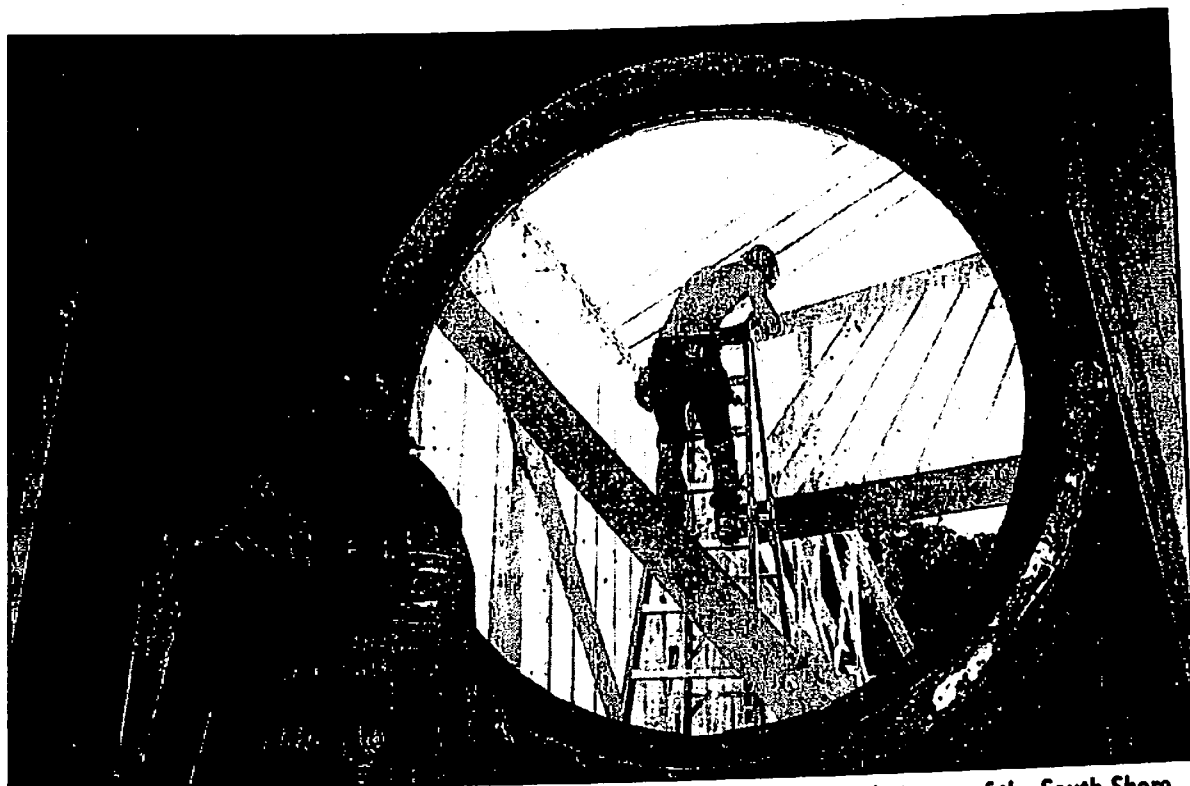
"Craigie and Debbie (Zildjian) have been longtime supporters and they're working very hard with the architects to design the percussion studio," she said, adding that the painting studio will be called The Mary Redmayne Todd Studio. Todd, an accomplished artist whose career

took her from costume design for the film industry in Los Angeles to painting and sketching, donated the studio with her husband, Harry. Swem said the donation will give developing artists a permanent place in which to nurture their creativity and show their work.

In the meantime, the wing's shell has to be finished, the stairs built and the elevator installed. "The building is totally handicapped-accessible," McCluskey said, pointing to the elevator shaft.

And it appears to reflect an environmental awareness. "One thing people might like to know is that the septic system is part of the Bluefish River disposal project," he said. "We're very proud of that."

The leaching field for the project is located under what will be the center's parking lot. The center's septic system will be shared by three private residences whose septic problems have contributed to the pollution of the Bluefish River, he said. According to an



Barbara Clifford, chairman of the Ellison Center capital campaign and vice-chairman of the South Shore Conservatory board of trustees, stands inside a window that will soon be a doorway.

agreement reached among the center, the town of Duxbury and the owners of the three residences, the Ellison Center agreed to provide space for septic effluent. Within a year after completion, the Bluefish River shellfish beds will be considered pollution-free and ready for harvesting. In return, the center will receive reduced permit fees.

Outside work includes restoring the exterior of the former church, which includes painting the trim, repointing the bricks and planning the landscaping. "The roof is in pretty good shape," McCluskey said, adding that it will probably last another 10 years.

As for landscaping, plans include an entrance garden, a sculpture garden and a children's garden. Glynn

said that Peggy Connors of Connors Landscape is working on the design with the center's architect, Vcevy Strekalovsky of Strekalovsky & Hoyt of Hingham; Mary White, a landscape architect in Quincy; and a group of neighbors.

"Several businesses such as Shawn Dahlen Construction Company and Paul Ripley Outdoor Living Environments have offered to donate excavation work," Glynn said, adding that



Bryan, 9, and Leeanna Krisko, 7, lend helping hands.

landscaping will make use of conifers, sweet gum trees and dogwoods.

The entrance garden will frame a border around a brick courtyard leading to the center's main door.

The walkway, with a basket-weave pattern and granite square, will feature rows of bricks, which are tied to the community campaign. For each \$1,000 donation, donors may have a brick engraved. The brick program, one of many in the capital campaign, offers a way to support the Ellison Center and have one's family name prominently placed for years to come, Glynn said.

Jim Simpson, executive director of the South Shore Conservatory, said opening the doors to the public during construction was important for a number of reasons. "It's a way of saying, 'Come, see what you've helped us to do,'" he said.

It's also a way to create awareness for the capital campaign. To date, the center has raised \$2.1 million, for which

Simpson said the organization is grateful. But he and other organizers estimate that they will need between \$300,000 to \$400,000 to complete the project. "We keep raising what we need, but costs don't stay the same."



Jerry Pepe of Carriglio Construction works in a new basement area.

Staff Photos by Chris Bernstein



Workers busy themselves with construction of a large addition.



**South Shore Conservatory trustees Mary Stohn, Frank Wisneski, Barbara Clifford,
Jane Carr and Fred Clifford.**